

Paul

**ROBESON**

**THE PEACE ARCH CONCERTS**



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Folk Era FE1442CD

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## THE PEACE ARCH CONCERTS



BRETHREN.DWELLING.TOGETHER.IN.UNITY

In the 1950's, Paul Robeson, one of the greatest singers, artists and activists of the 20th century, found his passport revoked and his travel to Canada forbidden by the United States Government because of his political views. Defying the attempts to silence him, in 1952 and 1953, he stood on a flat-bed truck parked one foot from the Canadian border at the Peace Arch Park in Blaine, Washington and sang to 40,000 Canadians and Americans. These concerts, including his dramatic 1953 speech, are presented here along with a compelling account of his struggle to be heard.

### May 18, 1952 Concert:

- 1. Peace Arch Introduction • 2. Opening Remarks by Harvey Murphy • 3. Paul Robeson's Welcoming Remarks • 4. Every Time I Feel The Spirit • 5. Intro to Joe Hill by Harvey Murphy • 6. Joe Hill • 7. Loch Lomond • 8. Intro. to No More Auction Block • 9. No More Auction Block • 10. Oh No, John • 11. Love Will Find A Way • 12. Ol' Man River

### August 16, 1953 Concert:

- 13. Introductory Speech • 14. Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel • 15. Go Down Moses • 16. Jacob's Ladder • 17. Theme From Beethoven's 9th Symphony • 18. Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes • 19. Joe Hill • 20. Oh Thou Silent Autumn Night • 21. Scandaliz' My Name • 22. Song Of The Four Rivers • 22. Without Thee (Gaelic Folk Song) • 24. Chin Chin (Chinese Marching Song) • 25. Speech

Total Time: 66:19

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*“As an artist I come to sing,  
but as a citizen, I will always  
speak for peace, and no one  
can silence me in this.”*

- Paul Robeson

Paul  
**ROBESON**  
THE PEACE ARCH CONCERTS

By Ian Shaw

**On May 18, 1952, Paul Robeson, in defiance of the United States government, stood on a makeshift stage at the Peace Arch Park in Canada, one foot away from the American border, and sang to 40,000 Canadians and Americans, proving that his voice could not be silenced.**



“The song of freedom must prevail,” he had written three years earlier. And prevail it did, after a populist struggle by Robeson and his supporters as they stood up to the world’s most powerful government.

The story of that struggle and that concert is as dramatic and inspiring as its setting. The Peace Arch Park, near Blaine, Washington, is a national park on the Washington State side of the U.S.-Canadian border and a provincial park on the British

Columbia side. The park is dominated by a 60-foot-high monument commemorating the long-standing peace between the United States and Canada. The hills surrounding the marker formed a natural amphitheater for Robeson’s concerts, and he sang there four times from 1952 to 1955, with the back of a flat-bed truck as a stage, to an audience of Canadians and Americans. The first two concerts, given May 18, 1952 and August 16, 1953, are presented here.

## Prologue

Even a short summary of Paul Robeson's accomplishments makes for a long list. Born in 1898 in Princeton, N.J., the son of a former slave, he graduated at the top of his high school class and attended Rutgers University on a scholarship, where he was one of three Black students in his class. He was the second Black named college football All-American. In his junior year he was Phi Beta Kappa. He graduated valedictorian, and was the third Black scholar to attend Columbia Law School. While pursuing law, he played professional football on weekends. Finding opportunities for Black lawyers limited upon graduation in 1923, he moved to theater and became the most recognized Black actor of his time, primarily for his definitive portrayal of Shakespeare's *Othello*.

He brought the first serious portrayals of Blacks to movies when quality roles for Blacks were non-existent. His acting career gave rise to a phenomenal singing career, and Jerome Kern wrote *Showboat's* "Ol' Man River" specifically for Robeson. He was instrumental in popularizing Negro Spirituals. He became widely regarded as the first artist-activist in this country.<sup>1</sup> As a musicologist, he researched traditional songs from many cultures, and sang them to show their similarities. He learned to speak, write, and sing in over 20 languages and

sang to packed concert halls on six continents. He was the first major concert artist to refuse to perform before segregated audiences.<sup>2</sup> "The idea of my concerts," he said, "is to suggest that all men are brothers because of their music."<sup>3</sup>

He moved through the world of the artistic and politically elite, all the while championing the common man. Robeson knew and worked with people like Albert Einstein, Jawaharlal Nehru, Nikita Khrushchev, W.E.B. DuBois, Indira Gandhi, Harry Belafonte, Pete Seeger, Langston Hughes, Dizzy Gillespie, Eugene O'Neill, and many others. In short, during the 1940's, he was, "one of the most prominent Black men in the world."<sup>4</sup>

Robeson was internationally recognized for his stance for civil rights in America and around the world. He headed an organization that challenged President Harry Truman to support an anti-lynching law. He co-founded the Progressive Party and actively campaigned with Henry Wallace. Robeson saw the plight of the working class, black or white, as inextricably linked to the oppression of black Americans, and to oppressed people internationally. Through his words and his songs, he spoke out against oppression at every opportunity, regardless of the consequences, and the personal and professional consequences were heavy. Robeson's political views

caused him to be written out of American history books, as the U.S. government came to regard him as "one of the most dangerous men in the world."<sup>5</sup>

As an avowed "anti-fascist," two politically defining moments for Robeson were his travels to the Soviet Union in 1934 and to Spain in 1937. In the Soviet Union, he was deeply impressed with the lack of racism he saw and felt, describing his visit as "the first time I felt like a full human being."<sup>6</sup> From then on, he spoke openly and passionately about his friendship for the Soviet Union and his belief in America's need for peaceful co-existence. Then in Spain at the height of the Spanish Civil War, he sang for the loyalist forces fighting Franco and Hitler's fascism, coming to believe that "Workers have a natural solidarity with the colonial peoples because they have the same force to fight against."<sup>7</sup> In the 1940's, his political beliefs caused deep suspicion among many in the United States. By the 1950's, they cost Robeson his freedom, his passport, and, effectively, his career.

In the 1940's, he was one of the top ten paid concert artists in the world. His 1947 income was reportedly over \$100,000. By 1952 that figure plummeted to approximately \$6,000<sup>8</sup> as he began to find his concerts canceled, his records pulled from store shelves, himself barred from performing,

and blacklisted at major concert halls and on television and the radio. Finally, in 1950, his passport was revoked.

"As early as 1941, unbeknownst to Robeson, forces in government, led by the FBI, had targeted him as dangerous; they considered his activism to be against the best interests of the American government. While he was touring the nation on behalf of the American war effort [during World War II] he was secretly placed on the 'DetCon List.' In case of a national emergency, he would have been detained as a 'communist' and jailed in a concentration camp with others similarly targeted."<sup>9</sup>

Robeson's political viewpoints had long been part of his concerts, but during World War II, despite America's fears about communism, the Soviet Union was an ally. Robeson campaigned for the war effort, often giving concerts to help raise war

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## Unfortunately, the overriding sentiment in America during this period was the fear of and battle over communism - far overshadowing the issue of civil rights.

bonds, so his anti-fascist stance was easily accepted. After World War II, though, Robeson found his views removed from mainstream America's. His management began to hear requests, and then demands, that he remove his politics from his concerts, and simply sing — something he refused to do.

In 1947 Robeson indicated he might retire from concert performing, but said, "I shall always sing for my college and trade union friends who allow me to sing what I want to sing."<sup>10</sup> Foremost in his thinking was that he must help make Blacks full citizens in America. Unfortunately, the overriding sentiment in America during this period was the fear of and battle over communism — far overshadowing the issue of civil rights.<sup>11</sup>

Robeson's worst troubles began after

the 1948 World Peace Conference in Paris, where he said he didn't believe Black Americans would go to war on behalf of a government that oppressed them. The reaction from the American press, government, and people was strong and castigating. The most explosive example was rioting in 1949 at a Peekskill, N.Y. concert. Hundreds were injured, and many cars damaged as reactionary anti-communists threw stones and attacked concert-goers while state police looked on, doing little. From this point onward, a fear of violence surrounded his appearances. In addition, political terror began to be used against him. Robeson found himself under constant FBI surveillance. Concert sponsors were threatened with foreclosures of their mortgages, and concert attendees found themselves photographed and their license plate numbers written down by FBI agents.

In August of 1950, during the Korean War, the U.S. government revoked Robeson's passport, announcing that "the State Department considers that Paul Robeson's travel abroad would be contrary to the best interests of the United States."<sup>12</sup> An eight-year struggle for his right to travel began. In his column for Freedom, a Harlem newspaper, Robeson wrote, "For the past several years, a vicious effort has been made to destroy my career. Hall-owners, sponsors, and even audiences have been

intimidated. Recently in Chicago, 15,000 persons who wanted to attend one of my concerts had to assemble in a park because the hall owner had been threatened. The outrageous denial of my passport bars me from accepting contracts to appear in England, France, China, and many other lands. Although I have recorded for every major recording company and sold millions of records both here and abroad, these companies refuse to produce any new recordings for me. What is the meaning of this? It is an attempt to gag artistic expression, to dictate whom the people shall hear, and what they shall hear."<sup>13</sup> The Council on American Affairs issued a statement saying, "The invalidation of Paul Robeson's passport is another blatant example of the administration's efforts to silence the demand of Negro Americans for their full rights as citizens."<sup>14</sup>

### Invitation to Canada

It was against this background that Harvey Murphy, Regional Director of the Western District of the Mine, Mill and Smelters Workers' Union of British Columbia, Canada, invited Robeson to attend its annual convention from Jan. 31 to Feb. 2, 1952. "Robeson, aware of the union's stand with respect to their black members and other oppressed peoples, readily accepted their invitation."<sup>15</sup> Union

officials knew Robeson's passport had been canceled, but since, as Murphy recollected, "no native-born American ever needed a passport to enter Canada,"<sup>16</sup> no one expected trouble. Robeson himself later wrote, "No American needs a passport to enter Canada, so in spite of my passport difficulties, I expected no action by the State Department."<sup>17</sup> Both men were wrong.

Robeson arrived in Seattle on January 30. Since Peekskill, there was concern for his safety when he traveled. The Seattle branch of the National Negro Labor Council arranged the trip to the border, and as organizer Vivian George recollects, had "several cars with some hefty people in them to go with Paul to the border. We began with three cars, one in front, one with Paul in the middle, and a third one behind."<sup>18</sup>

Upon reaching the border, Robeson recalled, "There were many Canadian acquaintances, and a very friendly Vancouver press" waiting for him. "They assured me that the Canadian government would not refuse me entry, and that Vancouver was waiting to give me a warm welcome. Then the representative of the American State Department called me in, and nervously informed me that though no passport was needed, a special order had come through forbidding me to leave the country. If I did, it might mean five years

and a fine!"<sup>19</sup> The border officials were armed with an executive order signed by President Truman, drafted from a 1918 law, giving the government the power to prevent anyone considered a security risk from leaving the country during wartime.<sup>20</sup>

While Robeson was arguing with the border guard, the delegation from the Mine, Mill Union arrived to escort him to Vancouver. "The Canadians were very angry," Robeson wrote, "and explained in no uncertain language that this was no way to build Canadian-American friendship."<sup>21</sup> Harvey Murphy was one of the Vancouver delegates, and it was there that he first proposed arranging some way for Robeson to sing across the border.<sup>22</sup>

According to Jerry Tyler, secretary of the Seattle CIO council and host of a biweekly Seattle radio program devoted to labor issues, the original plan was to "cut a broadcast, tape it, and put it aboard an American mailship, the crews of which were manned by the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union. The ship would have arrived in Vancouver the next day, and the union members could take the tape up to the Mine, Mill convention and play it at the hall they had set up for Robeson's concert."<sup>23</sup>

### **Concert by Telephone**

Word spread about Robeson's being turned away, and another convoy formed

for the drive back to Seattle. Robeson returned there late on January 31. Tyler recalled that, "After we'd recorded a message for the broadcast, we got word that a procedure had been set up where if Paul could make a telephone call, they could broadcast it directly over loudspeakers to the convention." According to Mine Mill member Ray Stevenson, the telephone hookup was a bootleg — put together illegally by some members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers against resistance from the Vancouver telephone company,<sup>24</sup> but it worked masterfully in spite of the opposition.

Tyler described how, the next evening, while the New York Times ran a story about Robeson's exit to Canada being barred in the best interests of the government,<sup>25</sup> "Ten to twelve of us gathered in the office of the Marine Cooks and Stewards guildhall while Paul made the call. He sat at the desk with the telephone while he made the address. It was, as usual, with that deep feeling he had. He told them how sorry he was that he couldn't be there, and how proud he was that even though forces were keeping him from being there in person, they still couldn't stop him from sharing his message. He sang a couple of songs for them then, and talked some more.

There was not a dry eye in that office when he finished."<sup>26</sup>

## **"I want to sing to and for my people and the workers. No tickets over a dollar."**

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The effect was equally moving for the assembled Mine, Mill workers in Canada. They had sold out a hall for Robeson's concert to conclude the conference, and word had traveled about Robeson's being barred. Mine, Mill leaders told members to attend anyway and turn the gathering into one of protest. The members didn't know of the telephone hookup, though, so when Robeson's voice boomed out over the loudspeakers, they were astonished.<sup>27</sup> Robeson's words electrified the crowd. He encouraged them to continue the struggle for peace and freedom.<sup>28</sup> He told them that the "refusal to allow me to cross the border was an act of the American administration, not an act of the American people,"<sup>29</sup> and most importantly, he said, "You just let me know when you want me to come back and sing for you, and I'll come back and sing."<sup>30</sup>

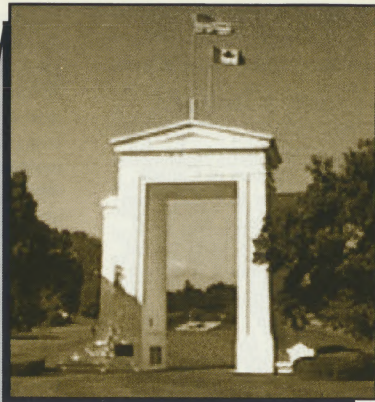
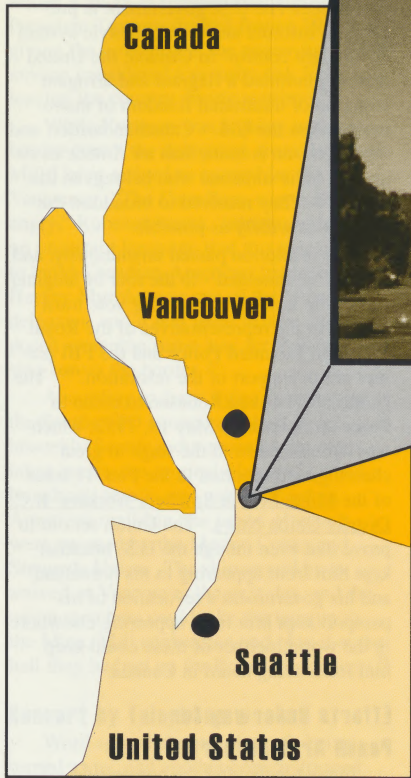
After Robeson finished, Murphy and other union leaders spoke. They admonished the U.S. for denying Robeson entry, and drafted a resolution to the United Nations' Civil Rights Committee, protesting the U.S. action. The resolution listed their grievances, stating "The U.S. Department of State has chosen to censor what the

Canadian people shall hear, and whom they should see; The U.S. government is prepared to institute an American-style system of 'thought control' in Canada; the United States committed a flagrant and arrogant violation of traditional freedom of movement across the U.S. - Canadian border; and Paul Robeson is more than an American citizen — he is someone who belongs to the world."<sup>31</sup> They resolved to broadcast the incident as widely as possible.

The resolution passed unanimously, and Murphy commented - to the roar of laughter - that "the lack of a dissenting vote must mean that the representatives of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the FBI present are in support of the resolution."<sup>32</sup> The Union also booked Robeson to come to Peace Arch Park on May 18, 1952, which was announced from the stage to great cheering, and reported in the Feb. 11 issue of the Mine, Mill & Smelters Workers' B.C. District Union News. The Union set out to prove that even though the U.S. blacklist kept him from appearing in his homeland, and his government's revocation of his passport kept him from appearing elsewhere in the world, neither of these could keep him from being heard in Canada.

### **Efforts Underway for Peach Arch Concert**

Immediately after the convention,



*The peace Arch on the US-Canada border near Blaine, Washington has inscribed on its south face "Children of a Common Mother" and on its north face "Brethren Dwelling Together in Unity."*

Union officials began promoting the Peace Arch concert. They sent letters to all the unions and affiliates in the region, asking them to "seize the opportunity to register their protest against the United States government."<sup>33</sup> All the major unions in the Northwest worked together to get the word out. Ads ran in the B.C. District Union News and the Daily Worker. The Daily Worker's story was, "An appeal to all people's organizations to make the Paul Robeson rally at Peace Arch Park May 18, a gathering of international significance for Peace and Freedom." A member of the organizing committee wrote: "Join us at

the Peace Arch not only to hear the greatest living voice sing and speak for us, but to express indignation over the United States' State Department's refusal to permit Robeson to leave the U.S."<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile in New York, Robeson's friends and associates worked to make the Peace Arch concert the centerpiece of a two-month tour.<sup>35</sup> Despite his financial circumstances, when Robeson was booked to play at the Peace Arch and a subsequent show in Seattle, he said "I want to sing to and for my people and the workers. No tickets over a dollar."<sup>36</sup>

As May 18th drew near, preparations were made at the park itself. Buses were chartered to transport people from Vancouver. Americans parked a flat-bed truck within one foot of the border on the U.S. side to be the stage. An upright piano was placed on the truck. Speakers were mounted on the top of the truck and hooked

up elsewhere around the concert area so a large audience could hear. Delegations from Canada and the U.S. came the night before to make sure no bombs or snipers were lying in wait. Many spent the night on the grounds to make sure no harm would come to Robeson. A group of unionists stood in front of the truck, looking out over the crowd, and behind the stage, the 60-foot monument glistened in the May sun as people began to arrive. Among the early arrivals were the FBI, who filmed and photographed the event while Border Patrol agents took license plate numbers from cars parked by the roadside.<sup>37</sup>

Beginning the morning of the 18th, cars arrived continually, as did 22 buses chartered by the Union.<sup>38</sup> Seattle attorney John Caughlin, who rode with Robeson, recollected that, "In order for the Canadian people to get to the concert at all, they had to walk distances from 3 to 5 miles because



Thousands flooded into the park on both sides of the Peace Arch (right) to hear Robeson sing and speak.

## The turnout surpassed even the wildest expectations of the Union, “filling the roads like overflowing streams.”

cars were stacked up and parked along the road for what seemed like half way back to Vancouver.”<sup>39</sup> “Three Mile Traffic Jam At Robeson Concert!” the Vancouver Sun Province headlined its coverage, while the B.C. District Union News described “cars parked for miles back along the highway and on all the cross-roads adjacent to the border,”<sup>40</sup> fouling traffic for hours, to the great delight of the organizers.

The traffic snafu was so immense that it not only worked against the U.S. Border Patrol, but even ended up working against the Union. “How many autos turned back out of the traffic jam, discouraged at the slowness of progress from 1:30 p.m. onwards, will never be known, but they reached the hundreds,”<sup>41</sup> the B.C. District Union News reported.

As the day went on, “people came from miles around, filling the roads like overflowing streams,” Robeson wrote.<sup>42</sup> The turnout quickly surpassed even the wildest expectations of the Union. The B.C.

District Union News wrote that “the estimate of those who would attend ranged from 10,000 to 20,000,”<sup>43</sup> but “long before the announced opening, the grass of the park was flowered with gay summer dresses of the women and children,”<sup>44</sup> and still the number of people flooding into Peace Arch Park grew. The show was scheduled for 2:30 p.m., but “the crowd still arrived, long after he had started, latecomers delayed by the traffic, eager to see him at least, and hear a little before the end.”<sup>45</sup> Finally, “in desperation, officials closed the border for an hour to relieve the jam.”<sup>46</sup>

Finally, Robeson took the stage — the wind whipping the American and Canadian flags flying atop the Peace Arch high above him. “I can’t tell you how moved I am today to see that nothing can keep me from my beloved friends in Canada!” he began. “This historic occasion today probably means that I shall be able to sing here and there. What is being done at this Peace Arch today will ring out, is already ringing out around the world.”

Then he opened his voice into the songs captured on this recording. In his autobiography, Robeson wrote, “In these last seven years, during which I have been cut off from personal contact with my friends in other lands, I have often reflected on the truth expressed in the words of a song that I have sung at many a concert, ‘Love Will

Find A Way.’”<sup>47</sup> He sang that song, as well as the labor classic ‘Joe Hill,’ and the song Robeson shall always be best known for, ‘Ol’ Man River.’ As was usual by that time, he changed some of that song’s lyrics. As originally written, the song was a lament. As Robeson altered the words, it became one of protest. Instead of the original “I’m tired of living and scared of dying,” he sang, “I must keep fighting, until I’m dying.”

“At the end of the program, Robeson again thanked the crowd and vowed to continue the fight for freedom as long as he could. He vowed to return to the Peace Arch the next year if he could not enter Canada willfully”<sup>48</sup> — a vow cheered by the assembled thousands.

When the final attendance was counted, the numbers were 25,000 to 30,000 on the Canadian side with 5,000 more on the American side, according to The B.C. Union News and other Canadian papers. The U.S. Border Patrol reported 5,000, as did the few U.S. papers that actually reported on the concert, since Robeson was blacklisted in the press as well as on the stage. “Diligent research of the available press files of many United States newspapers revealed only one reference to the first concert,”<sup>49</sup> Dr. Charles Wright wrote while chronicling the Peace Arch concerts. Lenwood Davis, another Robeson scholar,

who compiled *The Robeson Research Guide*, found no references in the U.S. press. News of the concerts made headlines around the world, though and the Manchester Guardian in England titled its article, “40,000 Attend Robeson Concert: Singer’s Voice In Pristine Glory.” Interesting, too, were the journalist’s observations about how Robeson was viewed in the United States. “Robeson’s very presence seems to arouse a hysterical fear in those who oppose his political views. Not since Frederick Douglass’ time have white Americans so greatly feared a colored American.”<sup>50</sup>

One thing that Robeson, the concert organizers, the government, and the press agreed on was that the support and turnout for Robeson was unprecedented. “Never before in the history of that region had there been so large a gathering!”<sup>51</sup> Robeson wrote. The tremendous enthusiasm to see him and to hear his message “of the need to turn U.S. policy around,”<sup>52</sup> brought a great deal of happiness to the beleaguered Robeson.

The concert was the first success that Robeson had in surmounting the government’s world-wide efforts to silence him. Demonstrating the concert’s positive effect on his spirits, Robeson mentioned it in an address to the National Convention of the Progressive party in 1952, saying his recent



tour was “climaxed at the border when 40,000 Canadian and American citizens, standing on both sides of the border at the Peace Arch, listened to a concert for peace and freedom of the Negro people.”<sup>53</sup> He also described the concert in a letter as “a cultural exchange between nations — a mass demonstration for peace.”<sup>54</sup> Most profound was the comment he made to Caughlin on the trip back to Seattle. “This is the first time since Peekskill that I’ve sort of felt that the atmosphere has changed. This is an experience that wipes out Peekskill in my mind.”<sup>55</sup>

It was a success in the minds of everyone involved, demonstrating that Paul Robeson could not be silenced when it came to his friends in Canada.<sup>56</sup> It was the most successful stop on Robeson’s tour financially, due to the donations raised by the Mine, Mill Union.<sup>57</sup> And both the Canadian and American governments couldn’t help but notice the effects of the concert, no matter how much the Americans tried to downplay it. The crowd had taken an enormous toll on the park, resulting in a week of replanting. The traffic had blocked travel across the international border for several hours, tying up the important route between Seattle and Vancouver. The stalled traffic brought many complaints from travelers to the border patrols in both countries.<sup>58</sup> Finally, in

the Union’s words, “the State Department’s refusal to allow Robeson into Canada to sing to 3,000 people had resulted in his singing to ten times that number, arousing a world-circling wave of publicity to slap the Pentagon dictators with the wham of a boomerang.”<sup>59</sup>

The Canadians were jubilant. It was all they could have hoped for in their quest to bring attention to the State Department’s mistreatment of Robeson and to assert their right to hear him sing. The union had the foresight to record the concert, and released a set of three 78rpm recordings, presented here. The jacket summarized how the concert had come about, stating, “Mine, Mill, honored to bring you this recording, makes this promise, that if Robeson’s forecast [to appear in Canada soon] is not confirmed before the summer of 1953, there will be another Peace Arch gathering to hear Paul Robeson.”<sup>60</sup>

### Second Concert Planned

Hearing no change in the State Department’s position, the Union waited until May of 1953 to plan a second concert for August 2, 1953. Ray Stevenson recalled that “there was opposition to Robeson’s returning for a second concert from some of the companies that the Unions contracted with, but after some bitter battling, the concert was still put on.”<sup>61</sup>

Even less was written about the second concert than about the first. The Vancouver Sun Province reported, “30,000 people hear Paul Robeson at the border.”<sup>62</sup> Other reports differed on the count. Dr. Wright reported that there were “almost as many people as at the first concert,”<sup>63</sup> but Robeson biographer Martin Duberman wrote, “he drew only half the crowd he had the previous year, and almost all from the Canadian side of the border.”<sup>64</sup> Ray Stevenson remembered people “not only from Canada, but from Seattle, Spokane, Portland, and all down the western seaboard”<sup>65</sup> coming to the concert, and making the event an international exchange.

Regardless of the turnout, the concert



*As close to Canada as he was allowed to be, Paul Robeson waves to fans while standing next to the US-Canada border marker.*

proved that the first one wasn’t an accident. Robeson could draw a crowd and garner attention from Canadians, and the United States could not succeed in silencing him. The concert also tied up border traffic again, and forced the government’s unspoken acknowledgment that by keeping Robeson out of Canada, it was in effect helping to further spread his message.

Like the first, the second Peace Arch concert was taped. Only one song is duplicated on this recording from the first concert, “Joe Hill,” which perhaps more than any other song demonstrates Robeson’s labor allegiance, so its duplication is appropriate. Musically, the second concert was the equal of the first, and despite the

vagaries of what today would be considered primitive equipment operating under less than ideal circumstances, these recordings show Robeson at the height of his singing prowess. Then fifty-five years old, Robeson had perfected his delivery of the

Negro Spiritual, and, as this recording demonstrates, had become proficient at singing melodies in Chinese and Russian.

Unique about the second concert was Robeson's extended speech. He was a dynamic speaker, successful at succinctly capturing the complexity of his beliefs, and, most remarkably, nearly prophetic. Far ahead of the country in his stance on civil rights and world peace, he proved himself a visionary with the words captured here. Over ten years before Martin Luther King Jr. said "I have a dream," Paul Robeson offered something even more concrete from his travels in the world. "I know there is one humanity — that there is no basic difference of race or color, no basic difference of culture, but that all human beings can live in friendship and in peace. I know it from experience. I have seen the people. I have learned their languages. I sing their songs!"

This was one of Robeson's last major union addresses, and one of his few extended speeches captured on recording. It is the essence of this great man distilled into the words of his choosing, and it captures each of the major themes in his work as his words ring out: That he was a citizen of the world attempting to bring a greater understanding of all people to all people through his songs. That he would "not do it as any great artist up there on the top, but down

among the masses of the people." That he spoke as one who had the right to do so, both as an American, and as a man whose father had once been a slave, and whose race had built the wealth of America. And finally, that he would never back down, not "one-thousandth part of one little inch."

At the end of his speech, Robeson vowed, "I hope to see you next year. No matter where I am in the world, I'll come back." And return he did, in August of 1954 for a third concert. It was one of his few major activities that year.<sup>66</sup> The concert again showed the U.S. government that it could not stop Robeson from being heard, and that Robeson and the Union had every intention of being persistent. Ray Stevenson estimated "that the turnout was perhaps down to 12 to 15 thousand," but "it was still impressive."<sup>67</sup> Even if the crowds were smaller, they remained large enough to demand notice, and cause embarrassment.

The remainder of 1954 passed without change in Robeson's passport situation or political status, though with the momentous Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, America at last seemed to be moving forward. With no word of change in the government's position on his travel to Canada, the Mine, Mill Union booked Robeson for his fourth concert at the Peace Arch on July 24, 1955.

## **"I hope to see you next year. No matter where I am in the world, I'll come back."**

Robeson, in his greeting for the program book, expressed optimism. "Here in the United States, we see many hopeful signs of a changing climate, and democratic peoples of all lands rejoice to see that McCarthyism is being rebuffed increasingly by the American people. Yes, and in view of recent court decisions, and the granting of passports to others who were previously refused, I look forward to an early victory in my long struggle to win the right to cross over the border at which we gather — the right to travel to many lands, to join with audiences throughout the world in the exchange of national cultures. Today the barriers still stand, but they are weakening and soon they will fall, and you and I together — people everywhere — shall sing the songs of peace and brotherhood, the songs of human triumph."<sup>68</sup>

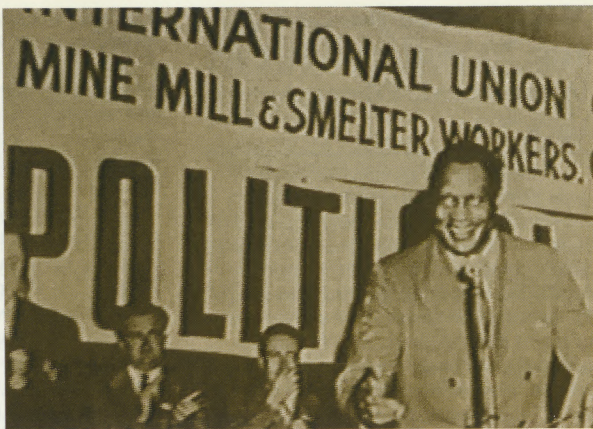
For the fourth concert, Robeson was at last able to report real progress. In early July at a meeting with the State Department, he was told, "careful attention would be paid to his passport situation." By July 18th, word came that he could travel to Canada. "Finally the State Department

was forced to retreat from its arbitrary and illegal ban on my travel to places which require no passport,"<sup>69</sup> Robeson wrote in his autobiography *Here I Stand*. This announcement, along with the prediction that he would soon be granted the right to travel anywhere, elicited great cheers from the crowd.<sup>70</sup>

The fourth concert was reported in the August edition of the *Daily Worker*, which estimated the attendance at "well over 10,000."<sup>71</sup> It also printed Robeson's introductory remarks, words which summarized the overriding message of the Peace Arch concerts. "I travel as an American in the interests of Peace, uniting the peoples for peace, and I stand always on the side of those who will toil and labor. As an artist I come to sing, but as a citizen, I will always speak for peace, and *no one can silence me in this*."<sup>72</sup>

Biographer Charles Wright suspected that the timing of the government's willingness to finally allow Robeson to travel was "such that it might have been intended to cancel the concert."<sup>73</sup> Perhaps if the change of mind had come sooner it could have succeeded in preventing the gathering. Since the concert had already been scheduled, however, it took place as planned, and the fourth and final Peace Arch performance became a celebration of the success of Robeson's and the Mine, Mill Workers'

To the Mine, Mill  
& Smelter workers:  
"I shall never forget  
this Union, for you  
made possible these few  
days that I had of true  
freedom."



combined efforts to break the illegal silence the U.S. government had imposed.

Robeson's right to travel to Canada was noted in the *London Times*,<sup>74</sup> as well as *The New York Times*, which reported that "Mr. Robeson can travel to and from Canada as often as he likes. The State Department declared that the restriction confining Mr. Robeson to the continental limits of the United States had been applied on the basis of wartime travel control restrictions."<sup>75</sup> Since the Korean 'War' was never actually a declared war, but in Eisenhower's own words, a "police action," this was never valid. With the 'war's' end, the government at last had nothing to stand upon, and surrendered.

But with Robeson's right to leave the United States properly returned, there was haggling about whether or not he could

enter Canada! The first Canadian announcement in late July of 1955 said "the final decision of Robeson's entry rested with the Canadian government, but his application would be considered on its own merits."<sup>76</sup> Robeson was booked to appear in Sudbury, Ontario, at the Mine, Mill Smelter's convention in February of 1956. The Canadian government throughout the next year alternately suggested that he could come but enjoy only limited travel, or could perform but not actually speak. Ray Stevenson recalled that "much of this exchange may not have been written down, as Harvey Murphy and several Mine, Mill delegates traveled to Ottawa and discussed

this in person. We pointed out that Canada and the States had an awfully long border, and we could plan quite a few more border concerts if the government would like, so they did finally relent."<sup>77</sup>

Robeson appeared at a packed Massey Hall in Toronto on February 18, 1956, and then at the 8th Annual Mine, Mill Convention in Sudbury, Feb. 27 to Mar. 2. There he addressed the union and said, "I want you to know that your understanding and courage and friendship during these years have helped sustain my strength and courage. I hope soon to have the right to travel everywhere, but I shall never forget this Union, for you made possible these few days that I had of true freedom."<sup>78</sup>

In April of 1956, both the *London Times* and the *New York Times* reported that the Federal Immigration Department of Canada denied Robeson a visa, announcing simply, he "would not be admitted under present auspices."<sup>79</sup> Due to that, Robeson had to cancel 17 concerts on a tour sponsored by the Labor Progressive Party of Canada. The unions were ready to keep on fighting though. At the 1956 Mine, Mill conference, a resolution was passed to continue the Peace Arch concerts, both "as a cultural event which will give brothers and friends on both sides of the border an annual visit with one another,"<sup>80</sup> and "to raise the matter of his inability to not just travel to

Canada, but to travel the world."<sup>81</sup> Those other concerts never came about as Canada eventually retreated in full from its attempt to deny Robeson entry. But the legal battle lasted two more years in the United States. The end was near when, on May 10, 1958, Robeson made a triumphant return to a sold-out Carnegie Hall in New York City. At the end of the concert, to thunderous applause, he announced that his passport battle had been won. By mid June of 1958 the Supreme Court ruled that "The State Department was not authorized by Congress to withhold people's passports because of alleged beliefs or associations."<sup>82</sup> On June 25 the State Department informed Robeson his passport would be returned, and delivered it to him the following day. By July 10 he was abroad, at last performing for people who had been demanding to hear this great artist for the previous 10 years.

Behind Robeson's at last returned freedom to travel was the undeniable success of the Mine, Mill and Smelters Worker's Union. They insisted that they had a right as people and Canadians to hear an artist of the world like Paul Robeson, and they made certain that he could be heard. They asserted that Robeson had a right to sing where and when he pleased, and despite the U.S. government's illegal denial of that right, they and Robeson claimed it. "I always have felt that the real role of world attention

to Robeson's imprisonment began at Blaine,"<sup>83</sup> Ray Stevenson said, and the unparalleled accomplishment of the attendance at all the Peace Arch concerts is testament to the truth of his statement.

Robeson's speech in 1953 may have been prophetic of things to come, but it was another writing, in 1949, that proved most prophetic about what the Peace Arch concerts would bring. Robeson had written, "I shall take my voice wherever there are those who want to hear the melody of freedom or the words that might inspire hope and courage in the face of despair and fear. My weapons are peaceful, for it is only by peace that peace can be attained. The song of freedom must prevail."<sup>84</sup>

## Epilogue

Robeson toured and traveled abroad to great acclaim for five more years, playing many major concert halls, and reprising his role in *Othello* at Stratford Upon Avon's Shakespeare Festival until illness forced him to retire and return home to America in late 1963. Following his return, Robeson rarely made public appearances, but there were two dynamic tributes held for him, one at the Hotel Americana and sponsored by *Freedomways* magazine, and another held at Carnegie Hall on his 75th birthday. Due to his health, Robeson was unable to attend the Carnegie Hall Celebration, but it

brought great joy to him at his sister's home in Philadelphia where he lived his last few years. Robeson died January 23, 1976 at the age of seventy-seven, but his legacy lives on as he begins to take his rightful place among the great artists and activists of the 20th century.

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## Learn More About Paul Robeson

This extensive reference focuses on one small but significant facet of a complex and controversial figure. Several very good volumes like those in the following bibliography can be found in your local public library.

The Internet also holds a vast array of facts and stories, as well as the legacy of Paul Robeson. A search of the name "Paul Robeson" will result in literally hundreds of links to sites all over the world. Start by visiting the website of the Paul Robeson 100th Birthday Committee.

<http://www.pobox.com/~robeson>

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**Thanks** to Ray Stevenson, Lil Greene, John Caughlan, Mark Rogovin and the Paul Robeson 100th Birthday Committee, Columbia College-Chicago, Dennis Shaw, Jack Hogberg, Carolyn Strong and Harvey Murphy and the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers Union.

**Special thanks** to Dr. Charles Wright, M.D. for bringing these recordings, and the story of Paul Robeson at the Peace Arch to light. Dr. Wright, an author and obstetrician-gynecologist, is the Founder (in 1965) and former Board Chairman (for 25 years) of Detroit's Museum of African American History. Dr. Wright has traveled to Central and Latin America, Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, Canada, Hawaii, and throughout most of the continental U.S.A. researching Paul Robeson's life for the books he has written on Robeson, including *Robeson: Labor's Forgotten Champion*, which has the distinction of being the only biography on Robeson to devote a full chapter to the struggle at the Peace Arch.



1949 photo of Peace Arch Park courtesy of Frank & Mabel Shaw

## PAUL ROBESON: THE PEACE ARCH CONCERTS

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Cover Photograph courtesy of **John Caughlan**  
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Paul **ROBESON**  
THE PEACE ARCH CONCERTS

From May 18, 1952 Concert:

- |                                       |      |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| 1. Peace Arch Introduction            | 1:04 |
| 2. Opening Remarks by Harvey Murphy   | 1:45 |
| 3. Paul Robeson's Welcoming Remarks   | 1:42 |
| 4. Every Time I Feel The Spirit       | 2:02 |
| 5. Intro to Joe Hill by Harvey Murphy | :36  |
| 6. Joe Hill                           | 2:58 |
| 7. Loch Lomond                        | 1:47 |
| 8. Intro. to No More Auction Block    | 1:25 |
| 9. No More Auction Block              | 2:09 |
| 10. Oh No, John                       | 2:23 |
| 11. Love Will Find A Way              | 2:27 |
| 12. Ol' Man River                     | 2:06 |

From August 16, 1953 Concert:

- |                                       |       |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| 13. Introductory Speech               | 3:23  |
| 14. Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel     | 1:34  |
| 15. Go Down Moses                     | 2:15  |
| 16. Jacob's Ladder                    | 2:27  |
| 17. Theme From Beethoven's 9th        | 3:01  |
| 18. Drink To Me Only With Thine Eyes  | 2:48  |
| 19. Joe Hill                          | 3:13  |
| 20. Oh Thou Silent Autumn Night       | 2:30  |
| 21. Scandaliz' My Name                | 1:57  |
| 22. Song Of The Four Rivers           | 3:08  |
| 23. Without Thee (Gaelic Folk Song)   | 3:31  |
| 24. Chin Chin (Chinese Marching Song) | 1:46  |
| 25. Speech                            | 12:36 |





Paul  
**ROBESON**  
**THE PEACE ARCH CONCERTS**

**May 18, 1952:**

1. Peace Arch Intro
2. Harvey Murphy  
Opening Remarks
3. Paul Robeson's  
Welcoming Remarks
4. Every Time I Feel The  
Spirit
5. Intro to Joe Hill  
by Harvey Murphy
6. Joe Hill
7. Loch Lomond
8. Intro to No More Auction Block
9. No More Auction Block
10. Oh No, John
11. Love Will Find Out The Way
12. Ol Man River

**August 16, 1953:**

13. Introductory Speech
14. Didn't My Lord Delivers Daniel
15. Go Down Moses
16. We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder
17. Theme: Beethoven's 9th Symphony
18. Drink To Me Only With  
Thine Eyes
19. Joe Hill
20. Oh Thou Silent Autumn Night
21. Scandaliz' My Name
22. Song Of The Four Rivers
23. Without Thee (Gaelic)
24. Chin Chin (Chinese)
25. Speech

